My Father, My Son (1986), by Elmo Zumwalt, Jr., Elmo Zumwalt III, and John Pekkanen [1]

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My Father, My Son is a dual autobiography by father and son Elmo Russell Zumwalt Jr. and Elmo Russell Zumwalt III published by Macmillan Publishing Company in 1986, detailing their experiences during the Vietnam War and particularly with Agent Orange, an herbicide used for defoliation and crop destruction during the war. As a commander in the Navy, Zumwalt Jr. ordered the use of Agent Orange in South Vietnam, where Zumwalt III was stationed. In the 1980s, Zumwalt III was diagnosed with two cancers, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and Hodgkin's disease, and his son, Elmo Russel Zumwalt IV, was diagnosed with a learning disability. Zumwalt III and his father co-wrote My Father, My Son to argue that Agent Orange caused their family's medical problems contributing to a public discussion of what should be done for those exposed to Agent Orange.

During the Vietnam War, the US military used herbicides to defoliate plants and crops in a campaign called Operation Ranch Hand from 1961 to 1970. The herbicides caused trees to shed their leaves, thus removing the dense jungle cover that was a part of Vietnam's landscape. The chemical defoliation campaign inhibited the guerilla fighting tactics of the Viet Cong, one of the groups fighting against the US during the war. Named for the colored stripe on their containers, the herbicides included Agent Orange, Agent White, and Agent Blue. The most widely employed herbicide, Agent Orange, had a composition of equal parts of two herbicides, 2,4-D (2,4-dichlorophenoxyacetic acid) and 2,4,5-T (2,4,5-trichlorophenoxyacetic acid).

While serving as commander of US inland naval forces from 1968 to 1970, Zumwalt Jr. ordered the increased use of Agent Orange along the riverbanks and coastal area of the Ca Mau Peninsula, the southernmost tip of Vietnam. One of the sailors patrolling the rivers was Zumwalt III, who commanded an attack boat and a four-person crew from 1969 to 1970. During that time, Zumwalt III and his crew fought in areas that were sprayed by Agent Orange.

US president Richard Nixon discontinued the use of Agent Orange in 1970 after the US Department of Defense in Arlington County, Virginia reported that Agent Orange contained a contaminant called TCDD, or 2,3,7,8-tetrachloro-dibenzo-para-dioxin. Research showed that TCDD was teratogenic, causing birth defects [4] in rodents exposed to the compound in utero. An estimated nineteen million gallons of Agent Orange were dispersed over ten to fifteen percent of Vietnam, exposing military combatants and citizens of Vietnam.

In the 1970s, US veterans who had fought in the Vietnam War began to report health problems like skin lesions and cancer, as well as birth defects [4] in their children. Vietnam's soldiers and civilians reported similar health issues. Research indicated the possible toxicity of dioxins, leading veterans to question if their health problems were linked to the dioxins present in Agent Orange.

Zumwalt III and his father wrote My Father, My Son after Zumwalt III was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in 1983. As a dual autobiography, the 215-page book covers multiple generations of the Zumwalt family and spans a sixty-year period beginning in the 1920s. Other family members, colleagues, and close friends contributed short passages throughout the book, which read like journal entries alternating between different perspectives. Throughout the book, the authors focus on Zumwalt III and his father's relationship, and their military service experiences.

The book begins with an acknowledgements section and a map of South Vietnam and Cambodia. Following the map is the book's prologue, written by John Pekkanen, the writer who helped the Zumwalts arrange the book. Pekkanen also writes the beginning of the first chapter and the epilogue. In the two-page prologue, Pekkanen recounts a conversation with Zumwalt Jr. and Zumwalt III at Zumwalt III's home in Fayetteville, North Carolina, in April 1985. He introduces the duo's connection to the Vietnam War and Agent Orange and their beliefs about Agent Orange's impact on their family.

The main part of the book consists of three sections titled "Growing Up," "Vietnam," and "Back Home." The first section, "Growing Up," is the shortest section of the book, with only two chapters, but it covers the longest span of time from the 1920s to the 1960s. In the first chapter, Zumwalt Jr. writes about his upbringing in Tulare, California, his early US naval service, and how he met and married Mouza Coutelais-du-Rouche when he was stationed in Shanghai, China. He includes the birth of their son, Elmo Zumwalt III, who was born in July 1946 with an atrial-septic defect, a hole in a wall of his heart. At age five, Zumwalt III was hospitalized with polio, and at age twelve, he had open-heart surgery to fix the atrial-septic defect.
Most of the second chapter is told from Zumwalt III's perspective. He credits his serious personality to his early health issues and his hard-working ethic to being the eldest son of a naval officer, stating that he felt responsible for his three siblings during his father's long absences. He writes about joining the Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps (NROTC) while studying at the University of North Carolina [5] at Chapel Hill, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and meeting Kathy Counselman, whom he married on 11 July 1970.

The next section of the book, "Vietnam," details both Zumwalts' experiences in the late 1960s and early 1970s and contains chapters three through seven. In the third chapter, Zumwalt Jr. explains his role in the Vietnam War. In the early 1960s, he was assistant to Paul Nitze, the Assistant Secretary of Defense and later Secretary of the US Navy. Zumwalt Jr. writes that both he and Nitze disagreed with the United States' increasing involvement in Vietnam. However, in 1968, Zumwalt Jr. became commander of naval forces in Vietnam, and he reported there in September while his wife and children moved to Clark Air Base in the Philippines. His eldest son, Zumwalt III, was attending Navy communications school in Newport, Rhode Island. According to Zumwalt Jr., before his departure, he asked Zumwalt III not to volunteer for active duty in Vietnam.

As the third chapter continues, Zumwalt Jr. writes that his top priorities at a naval commander were to reduce US commitment in Vietnam and to save American lives. He commanded ships that patrolled the inland rivers and coast of Vietnam, called the brown-water navy. Among other changes, Zumwalt Jr. increased the use of Agent Orange along riverbanks to protect those patrolling the rivers. He notes that river patrol casualties dropped with increased dispersal of Agent Orange. He also recounts being reassured by military personnel that Agent Orange was not harmful to humans [6]. At the end of the third chapter, Zumwalt Jr. writes about learning that his son, Zumwalt III, volunteered to serve on the river patrols. Because he had the authority to deny the request, Zumwalt Jr. received a letter from his son asking him not to interfere, a request which Zumwalt Jr. honored.

In chapter four, Zumwalt III explains how he chose to lead individual swift boat patrols. After training in San Diego, California, Zumwalt III reported to Vietnam in August of 1969 with his boat crew, comprised of four others who served together on coastal and river patrol from August 1969 to June 1970.

Zumwalt III narrates his experiences in Vietnam in chapters four through six, and his father writes a passage in each chapter. His girlfriend, his crewmates, and his brother, Jim, also make short contributions. In chapter seven, Zumwalt III writes about having a skin rash that at the time he believed was caused by the sun, but later believed was related to Agent Orange. By the time of his departure in June 1970, Zumwalt III had received two Bronze Stars, a medal awarded to US soldiers for heroic achievement, while his father, Zumwalt Jr., was named Chief of Naval Operations, and became the youngest person to achieve that position in the history of the US Navy.

The last section of My Father, My Son, "Back Home," begins with several pages of photographs of the Zumwalt family and the other main people who are mentioned in the book. In addition to Zumwalt III and his father, Zumwalt III's wife, his sisters, his brothers-in-law, his Vietnam crewmates, and his daughter, Maya Zumwalt, also write in the last five chapters of the book.

Chapter eight focuses on Zumwalt Jr.’s term as Chief of US Naval Operations and Zumwalt III's return to the States. Zumwalt III and his wife married shortly after his return from Vietnam, after which he entered law school at the University of North Carolina [5]. Zumwalt III also discusses the difficulty of adjusting to civilian life, particularly due to the public's generally negative views of the Vietnam War and Vietnam veterans. He credits his family and his wife with helping him adjust better than other veterans and continues to share how his experiences in Vietnam changed him. Upon graduating in 1973, Zumwalt III began working at the law firm McCoy, Weaver, Wiggins, Cleveland & Raper in Fayetteville, North Carolina.

In chapter nine, Zumwalt III writes that his son, Elmo Russell Zumwalt IV, was born on 12 March 1977. He notes that he and his wife felt that their son was slow to lift his head, crawl, sit up, and walk, but a pediatric neurologist did not find anything wrong. After Zumwalt IV’s nursery school teacher reported that his speech and learning abilities were developing slower than the other children, the Zumwalts visited various speech pathologists and child psychologists. However, they also did not diagnose anything abnormal about Zumwalt IV’s development. When he began first grade, Zumwalt IV was placed in a special education class. Zumwalt III writes that he and his wife discussed Agent Orange as the cause of their son's troubles after seeing television accounts of Vietnam veterans whose children had serious birth defects [4]. However, Zumwalt III recalls that he did not think there was a connection at the time.

In 1982, the year that his son was placed in a special education class, Zumwalt III visited a doctor about what he described as a dry, hacking cough. After a biopsy, a physician diagnosed Zumwalt III with a cancer of the lymphatic system, which functions in the human body's immune system. The specific type of cancer was called Nodular Poorly Differentiated Lymphoma (NPDL), a type of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma in which tumors develop from white blood cells and spread to the rest of the body through the lymphatic system.

Paul Bunn, an oncologist at the National Cancer Institute [7] (NCI) in Bethesda, Maryland, presented several options for treatment
to Zumwalt III, whose cancer, he believed, had spread to his spleen, bone marrow, and liver. Bunn informed Zumwalt III that his type of cancer moved very slowly, meaning that it spread over the course of several years, not months. However, Bunn also told Zumwalt III that his type of lymphoma was nearly always fatal. As recounted by Zumwalt III, he had two options, to begin chemotherapy and radiation therapy or to monitor the development of the cancer while waiting to participate in experimental trials for new NPDL treatments. He chose to wait for a chance to participate in an experimental trial.

Chapter ten focuses on changes in both Zumwalt III and his son’s medical conditions. One of Zumwalt IV’s speech teachers referred Zumwalt III and his wife to Salvatore DeMarco, a professor of speech, auditory, and language pathology at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina. DeMarco met with the Zumwalt family for several weeks, running different tests with their son before diagnosing him with sensory integration dysfunction, a learning disability. The learning disability affected Zumwalt IV’s ability to concentrate and to differentiate sights and sounds. According to Zumwalt III, DeMarco concluded that Zumwalt IV possessed a normal intelligence but was incapable of expressing it and that he would always deal with some level of the dysfunction.

Zumwalt III then recounts his attempt to qualify for an experimental treatment for his cancer at the University of California at San Diego in San Diego, California, in 1985. Researchers at UCSD took a lymph node biopsy to try to prepare for the trial. However, Zumwalt III’s biopsy revealed a second cancer called Hodgkin’s disease, another type of lymphoma cancer that would spread more quickly to more areas of the body than non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. Zumwalt III reports that doctors at the time remarked that it was rare to be diagnosed with two different lymphomas, and told Zumwalt III that he was the first documented person to develop Hodgkin’s disease after non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. He further records that his doctors were unsure of how to proceed and could not estimate his odds of survival due to the rarity of his case. Because of the new diagnosis, Zumwalt III decided to undergo a six-month period of chemotherapy to target the Hodgkin’s disease, during which he commuted from his home in North Carolina to Washington D.C. three days a month for six months.

After discussing his diagnosis in chapter ten, Zumwalt III says that he believes that his cancers are directly linked to his Agent Orange exposure. He admits that he was partially convinced of the link between Agent Orange and veteran’s health by a Vietnam veterans’ lawsuit against Agent Orange manufacturers that was ongoing at the time. He recounts that a lawyer asked him to be one of five representative plaintiffs in the lawsuit, but he declined, reasoning that after the cancer diagnoses, he wanted to spend all of his remaining time with his family. When the lawsuit was settled without trial, he notes that he wishes he had joined, especially after the plaintiff attorney informs him that the settlement amount may have been even higher had he joined. Zumwalt III details in the book how he was further convinced about the hazards of Agent Orange after receiving many letters from veterans’ families in response to a magazine article that he wrote about his illness in October 1984. He notes that as a lawyer, he does not think he can prove in court that Agent Orange is responsible for his cancers, his son’s learning disorder, and the illnesses reported by many Vietnam veterans, though he is convinced that it is.

Zumwalt III then deviates from his story-telling perspective to write a brief overview about Agent Orange. He explains how the dioxin chemical, the toxic part of Agent Orange, is an unintended contaminant that results from the production process. He also highlights how the US State Department and US chemical companies advocated for the safety of the herbicides, despite reports of birth defects in animals used in lab testing. Zumwalt III says that he and his father visited the US Pentagon to examine a map of Vietnam and sprayed locations, reaffirming Zumwalt III’s belief that he spent most of his tour in areas that were heavily sprayed by Agent Orange.

Zumwalt III then summarizes studies on Agent Orange and dioxins, admitting that some of the studies linking Agent Orange to human illness are inconclusive, but stating that he thinks the full story of Agent Orange’s health hazards will continue to emerge. In the book, he calls the hazards of Agent Orange a case in which the layperson is ahead of the scientist. Zumwalt III ends the section by acknowledging that his father, Zumwalt Jr., was involved in the decision to use Agent Orange. However, he says that he does not hold his father responsible for what he considers his own decisions and his own destiny.

At the end of chapter ten, Zumwalt III’s father and two sisters write about his six-month treatment and commute to Bethesda Naval Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland, which begins in March 1985. A family member accompanies Zumwalt III each time to take care of the travel arrangements and help with his post-treatment recovery. He continues to work full time at his law firm in Fayetteville, despite dealing with the side effects from chemotherapy like weight loss, increasing weakness, and frequent nausea. The family members highlight Zumwalt III’s courage and sense of humor during what they consider a very difficult time.

In chapters eleven and twelve, Zumwalt III and his family continue to write about his cancer treatment, describing how Zumwalt III’s cancer diagnoses changed their family relationships. Zumwalt III and his wife write about preparing for the future, because they know that his disease is almost certainly fatal even if the chemotherapy succeeds. During that time, Zumwalt III reunited with his Vietnam boat crew, and each crewmate writes a short entry, sharing their feelings about their reunion and about Zumwalt III’s cancer diagnoses.
In September 1985, Zumwalt III received three more months of chemotherapy treatment at Bethesda Naval Hospital. However, two weeks before his final treatment, Zumwalt III reports that he noticed an enlarged lymph node in his groin area. He suspected that it was Hodgkin's disease, which a biopsy confirmed, indicating that the chemotherapy treatment had failed. As a final option, his oncologist, John Nanfro, recommended an experimental procedure of total body radiation and chemotherapy, followed by a bone marrow transplant. The treatment would destroy the cancer as well as Zumwalt III's bone marrow, the substance inside bones that makes blood cells, requiring a bone marrow transplant. Despite the one-in-five chance of dying from what Nanfro describes as an excruciating medical procedure, Zumwalt III writes that he decided to do the transplant in order to spend as much time as possible with his family.

In chapter twelve, Zumwalt III discusses how in February 1986, he, his wife and children, his father, and his sister, temporarily moved to Seattle, Washington, where the treatment took place at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center. His sister accompanied him to the cancer center because she was the only sibling whose bone marrow closely matched to Zumwalt III's and could therefore supply the bone marrow for his transplant. The transplant succeeded, and Zumwalt III's body accepted the transplant cells, though he experienced severe side effects, including frequent vomiting, high fevers, and coughing up blood, which he described as physical agony unlike any he had experienced. After six weeks in an isolated, sterile room, Zumwalt III was discharged from the cancer center. His father, Zumwalt Jr. concludes chapter twelve by sharing a letter that Zumwalt III had written to him in case he died during the procedure. The ending epilogue states that as of 1 July 1986, five months had passed since the bone marrow transplant.

When My Father, My Son was published in September 1986, several publications, including Time magazine, the Los Angeles Times, Chicago Weekly, and the Library Journal reviewed the book. R.Z. Sheppard of TIME magazine praised the unassuming format of the book, stating that its unconventional journal entry narrative made its message even more effective than would a typical memoir. Martin Goldstein of the Los Angeles Times reviewed it alongside Peter H. Shuck's Agent Orange on Trial, written about the Agent Orange lawsuit. Goldstein acknowledged the two books' separate but ultimately interlinking perspectives, saying that they highlighted the tragedy of war, how there are no heroes or victors, but only victims.

In May 1988, CBS aired a television film based on the book, also titled My Father, My Son. Jeff Bleckner directed the film, and actors Keith Carradine and Karl Malden played Zumwalt III and his father, respectively. Howard Rosenberg, television critic for the Los Angeles Times, criticized the movie's screenwriters for not exploring more deeply the complex, ironic twist of fate that connected the two Zumwitals and Agent Orange. Shortly after the film aired, Zumwalt III died from his cancers on 14 August 1988. In 1991, the US Congress enacted a law called the Agent Orange Act of 1991, which presumed that certain diseases, proven to result from dioxin contaminants, were related to military service. The Agent Orange Act listed non-Hodgkin's lymphoma as one of the presumptive diseases for which veterans might be eligible for benefits. The Veteran's Administration in Washington, D.C., later recognized Hodgkin's disease as an additional presumptive disease. By 2016, there were fourteen cancers and health problems associated with Agent Orange for which veterans were eligible for benefits.

Sources

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